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ABSTRACT

This paper describes findings of research that explored the meanings and experiences of high school students in a Business Technology and Communications magnet high school located in a large, urban school district (Georgia) that has been under court-ordered desegregation since 1985. Data were obtained through classroom observations, focus-group discussions with a total of 112 students, analysis of program evaluations, and analysis of students' autobiographical structured writings. The study identified three spheres of influence in the school--students, parents, and teachers/administrators. Students described a deep incompatibility between their culture and that of the adults, suggesting that the school culture lacked attitudinal qualities that promote a facilitative environment for all students. The data led to the development of a grounded theory of facilitative learning environments. A facilitative learning environment is characterized by individual respect, acceptance, and opportunities for influence in the school. The greater the alignment between students' values about education and teachers' actual teaching practices, the more enthusiastic will be student engagement. (Contains 31 references.) (LMI)

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Interactive spheres of influence: A high school culture

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Interactive spheres of influence: A high school culture

The focus of this study is the culture of a high school which is best understood by seeing its impact on the experiences of school members --students, teachers, administrators, and parents. The school is a Business Technology and Communications magnet high school located in a large, urban school district that has been under court-ordered desegregation since 1985. The research questions are:"What is the meaning of schooling for these high school students?"; "How do students describe some of their experiences at school?"; "What influences shape these schooling experiences of students?". Triangulation of data collection includes classroom observations, anecdotal data from student focus groups and informal structured conversations with students, individual interviews, autobiographical structured writings of students, and archival data. Data analysis included qualitative inductive methods of constant comparison analysis and content analysis.

The findings generated from this study are the identification of a school culture characterized by a lack of student empowerment strongly dominated by the influence of the teachers and principal. "Culture" here does not refer to ethnic identity as in the minority studies of Ogbu (see Ogbu, 1993 for explanation of culture identities). Rather, we define culture as a shared social system (in this case, an urban high schooi) with its own set of rules, means of gaining recognition, and social patternings (how members of the culture relate to one another). The influences we found form what we describe as three interactive spheres of influence in the school - students, teachers/administrators, and parents. Perceptions of and experiences at school by students emerged that describe a deep incompatibility between their culture and that of the adults (teachers and administrators primarily). The incompatibility forms the basis of a grounded theory of student school culture which we interpret as being driven by the specific absence of attitudinal qualities that promote a facilitative environment for all participants. These qualities are individual respect and recognition, acceptance, and increased opportunities for influence in the school.

This grounded theory, which we term "facilitative learning environment", is supported by and adds to previous research that specifically addresses these attitudes. In fact, these findings date back almost three decades to Aspy and Roebuck (1973, 1977) who began their studies by researching Rogers' (1957) statement of a facilitative environment for therapeutic personality change in the context of education. In fact, their research during two decades has been identified "as among the largest and most exhaustive ever carried out in the field of education" (Aspy & Roebuck, 1983, p. 197). Furthermore, these studies were replicated by Tausch and Tausch (1980) with students enrolled in German schools. The findings of both studies indicated a significantly positive correlation between a high level of the facilitative environment and success in learning.

In his book *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*, Rogers' (1983) further summarizes earlier research on enhancing learning in the educational system. Some of these include providing "a climate of trust in the classroom in which curiosity and the natural desire to learn can be nourished and enhanced; ... working toward a participatory

mode of decision-making in all aspects of learning in which students, teachers, and administrators each have a part; ...helping students to prize themselves, ...to build their confidence and self-esteem; ...developing in teachers the attitudes that research has shown to be most effective in facilitating learning..." (p. 3).

Since the 1980's continued research and models for teacher training have been proposed (Gazda et al., 1995; Purkey & Novak, 1996). The same facilitative environment identified by Rogers and developed by Truax and Carkhuff (1967) forms the basis for a teacher training model of Gazda et al. (1995). Purkey and Novak (1996) use the term "invitational education theory" when referring to a similar facilitative learning environment. Invitational education is guided by the perceptual approach to understanding behavior as is the methodology of this study.

Methodology

The ability of a research design to address effectively the research question is the basis of an effective design (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Spindler, 1982). Therefore, the nature of the phenomenological/perceptual research questions necessitates qualitative ethnographic research using the emic of the students. We seek to illuminate the cultural context of an urban high school in order to gain an understanding of the experiences expressed within that context. Therefore, the focus is on the point of view of the students, rather than teachers or administrators, because only they are compulsory participants in school.

Role of researcher

As I (Newbill) began gathering data for this study, I was quite familiar with the school, the faculty, and many of the students through my role as evaluator of the magnet school programs. In that role during the previous two years, my duties primarily were office-based (e.g., analyzing student, parent, and teacher perception questionnaires and quantifying classroom observation data from structured observation forms). By association, these informants facilitated my entry into the students' world.

Site and Sample

West Landing High is a Business Technology/Communications magnet "school of choice" to which parents and/or students must apply for placement. There are no requirements for enrollment and any student who submits a complete, timely application is eligible for admittance. At the time of data collection (1992-1993), West Landing High enrolled 865 students, and was unique among the 11 district high schools in enrolling a large proportion of students of varied ethnic backgrounds. The ethnic composition of the student body during the 1992-1993 school year was 68% African-American, 13% Hispanic, 11% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Caucasian, and 1% Native American. Forty-eight percent of the 75 teachers were minority (predominantly African-American) and 52% were Caucasian. The principal was an African-American female and was the fifth person in six years to hold the position. Two of the three vice-principals were African-American, and three of the five counselors were African-American.

Additional demographic data gathered from the 1990 census indicated that over

one-third of the students enrolled at West Landing High lived in the surrounding neighborhood. Census data describe the socioeconomic condition of the neighborhood as: 40% African-Americans and 17% Caucasians below the poverty level; 58% of the total population earning under $20,000/year; over 75% multi-family homes;70% single-parent households; almost 40% newly located households; nearly 25% vacant houses. Finally, school-based data indicate that nearly half of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using qualitative research procedures involving the triangulation of observation field notes, interviews, anecdotal notes from both informal "conversations with a purpose" and formal focus groups, autobiographical questionnaires, and archival data. The interpretation of the data coalesced as building grounded theory.

Direct (nonparticipant) observations were made during approximately twenty weeks of class (November, 1992 through February, 1993) generating field notes for every class and every teacher. In an effort to enhance reliable understanding of the school's culture patterns that differentiated student experiences in school primarily by grade and race, a full week was spent attending classes in each grade level, until four weeks of observations (one week for each grade level) had been accumulated. Also, during the fieldwork phase, serendipitous observations were made throughout the building at various times during the day. The cafeteria was the only location in which observations were not made as a perceived lack of student welcome designated it as an exclusive student space.

Anecdotal notes during informal conversations with the students focused on what the students were experiencing before class, during class, and after class. These informal conversations were structured by a set of questions interwoven in the conversation and occurred through opportunistic sampling of student participants. Responses to these questions led to more in-depth interviews which enabled clarification and validation of the patternings noted from the more informal chats.

The in-depth student interviews also informed the formation of focus groups conducted in eight history classes, two classes per grade. A total of 112 students (approximately 10-18 students per class) were involved in the focus group discussions. This procedural sampling enabled a focus on student perceptions by grade since history is a required, grade level course. Additionally, history classes were purposefully selected with populations that best reflected the ethnic diversity in the school. Other procedural considerations included timing and group facilitator. The focus groups were scheduled for a Thursday since attendance records indicated that students skipped school more often on Monday and Friday. Openness and confidentiality during the groups were enhanced by the absence of the regular teacher and by student familiarity with me and my assistant. During the focus group sessions, my assistant took notes while I facilitated the discussions using a prepared outline of questions which would hopefully elicit responses about the meaning of schooling.

Another method of data collection was a structured autobiography entitled, "Why I Am As I Am.Malcolm X" (X ,1992). The form was distributed in January, 1994 to

English classrooms serving ninth-, tenth-, and twelfth- grade students. The questions contained in the autobiography were developed from counseling and guidance literature (Agatucci, 1991; Blair, 1991; Dickerson, 1988; Underwood, 1987). The autobiography primarily consisted of open-ended questions asking students how they viewed themselves, their fears, what made them angry, how they felt about school, their accomplishments, their future, and messages of parental encouragement.[1] Responses to the tenth-grade autobiographies are emphasized because this is a 'come of age to drop-out' time in the lives of these teens. At West Landing, almost half of the tenth-grade students drop-out after or during the tenth-grade. Every tenth-grade student was given the opportunity to write the autobiography and 68 (of 79) were useable. Unfortunately, the sample of students other than African-American (n=53) and Caucasian (n=13) were too few to include in analysis (e.g., two Hispanic, one Vietnamese, and one American Indian). Therefore, the information gained from autobiographies is limited to African-American and Caucasian tenth-graders.

The last source of data were program evaluation reports providing student, parent, and teacher perceptions of the school since 1990-1991; cohort trends in student achievement since Spring 1991; student attendance data; and intraschool memoranda. Other archival sources were historical data gathered from the local newspapers which offer a record of the history of the school, community, and the students.

Data Analysis

Inductive methods of data analysis typically used in qualitative research included constant comparison while engaged in field work and content analysis of focus group interviews and student autobiographies (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Member checking was used to confirm the researchers understanding of emic data. Observations were persistent and prolonged easing the obtrusiveness of the researcher and ensuring the trustworthiness of the interpretation of observed experiences and events.

Findings

A background of West Landing High School is presented to place the study in sociocultural context. The context suggests that present school culture of student powerlessness and discontent emerged as an influential pattern in the experiencing of the students as a seemingly inherent by-product of the school's history. Additionally, the data will be presented according to the identification of the 'interactive spheres of influence' in the school: the sphere of the students and the sphere of the teachers and administrators. Another sphere, that of the parents, can be influential as well. However, parental involvement at the school was minimal, and this sphere was essentially inactive, if not invisible. Emic data will be presented to support the identification of these spheres, their interactive relationship, and their influence.

The Context

The Business Technology theme is housed on the north and east corridors of the third floor; the Communications theme is located in the northeast corner of the ground floor. With magnet conversion, a south wing was added for the new cafeteria

and Learning Resource Center with little attempt by the designers to maintain architectural integrity. The architectural hodgepodge, change in economics, and racial make-up emerged as negative influences on student experiences in school.

For example, during focus group discussions, upperclassmen contrasted their slightly renovated school building with the several totally new, multi-million dollar high schools built as part of the desegregation remedy. They said West Landing was treated like a "second-class school" by the district, and proved they were using "old textbooks handed down from Central" (one of the new, multi-million dollar high schools) by showing that school's name stamped on the pages of their textbooks. Two seniors captured the general feeling by stating:

"If you are treated like garbage, you feel like garbage."

"If we use out-of-date books, we are out-of-date."

Safety was issue for students as a result of inconsistency in the application of security measures and a haphazard attitude of adults and students toward those measures. The school building is located on a busy intersection in midtown. The front doors are always unlocked because the security table sits on the main floor at the top of a flight of stairs. During the year data were collected, the security person assigned to the table was infrequently there. His presence was not relevant anyway since he could easily be avoided by ducking down the stairs to the basement floor rather than going up to the main floor. In addition to the table guard, four uniformed security guards daily patrolled the halls, and three vice-principals each monitored an assigned floor. Yet, this show of force did not instill a sense of security in the students. The primary reason being the easy access to the school from the several other doors on the two sides of the building. These were supposed to be locked from the inside. Yet, students typically would let anyone in or would have wedged the doors ajar with a mat or rock. Essentially, the building was easily entered and the security personnel easily avoided as revealed by this statement made by an African-American male:

> "Someone could come in that side door. . . " (cocking his fingers like a gun and firing) "... nobody'd ever know. "

Further evidence of the student concern with safety is addressed below in the discussion of segregation.

From the above, it seems the roots of student feelings of powerlessness and discontent, which characterized the student experiences in school, are found in the current environment. The student sphere of influence in school is shaped predominately by a lack of empowerment which has led to extreme discontent. The evidence for this sphere, including the most salient characteristics, are presented next.

Student Sphere

The student sphere of influence overwhelmingly identified the category of a lack of student empowerment with striking and interrelated characteristics of experiencing. Foremost among these is a deep pool of discontent and futility into which the other characteristics flow as major tributaries: continued segregation; emptiness; dissonance between perceptions and experiences; differential developmental perceptions between grade levels and ethnicity. All characteristics were found to be hallmarks of the student sphere of influence at West Landing High.

As will be seen, the sense of discontent and futility are thoroughly merged within the others. Yet, direct evidence of discontent came most strongly from student's discussing their perceptions of the principal. Students said that they had liked her as the assistant principal, but as principal, they "never see her" and "her rules are wrong." For example, t-shirts with any type of logo were considered "gang related" and not allowed in school; no hats could be worn in school; the restrooms on the second and third floors were locked; a dress-code was enforced at student social events located on campus; social events were restricted in number and kind. The latter was of greatest concern to the students, and is corroborated by our experience in that very few assemblies occurred during our three years of involvement at West Landing High. A rather poignant example of the sense of futility and lack of empowerment was related by a senior and editor of the school newspaper. He stated that five seniors had died violently during that year, but the principal would not allow the senior class to recognize their deaths at school.

Why do students in one of the most diverse high schools in the district and in a school whose mission is desegregation not integrate? The findings suggest that students did not choose to mix with others different from themselves. Responses to a perception survey administered as part of the program evaluation effort found that 43% of the students felt they did not get along with other another (Newbill ,1993a,1993b). Also, 46% of the entire student body did not feel safe on school grounds; and over 75% of the Vietnamese students did not feeling safe anywhere in school.

Additional data about student congregation patterns are supportive of self-imposed segregation. The following was revealed through observation notes made prior to the morning opening bell when students were only allowed on the main floor: African-American males lined the main corridor in front of the auditorium, with a clear view of the main entrance stairs; Vietnamese students, male and female, hung around the English as a Second Language classroom (their first class of the day) which was across the hall and to the left of the auditorium; Hispanic students, primarily male, stretched across the wall to the left of the main entrance, near the office, facing an empty display case; African-American females were cruising the side halls going in and out of the two women's restrooms; the few Caucasian students were not easily spotted, but the boys generally walked about alone and the very few girls found one another and were anywhere but in the restrooms.

Furthermore, data suggest that teachers and administrators neither provided opportunities for integration nor promoted integration. In the classrooms, the segregation was maintained, and, again, ignored by the teachers. Few situations of overt racism were observed, yet even in these instances the teacher did not intervene. Only during the monthly "cooperative learning day" did the teachers provide intentional integrative experiences for the students. A vignette taken from field notes are informative of the racism and the minimal efforts of teachers to relieve intolerant attitudes.

> A classroom occasion of integration occurred in an upper level Ecology class. Again, as a cooperative learning situation, students were assigned to groups of four with the task of answering 25 questions on fission. The class was

predominantly African-American, but one table was integrated with two Hispanics (female and male) working with two African-Americans (female and male). The African-American female showed little interest in the work, and, by busying herself with the contents of her purse, generally disassociated herself from the class. The Hispanic students worked together on the assignment, dividing the work, asking and answering questions, all in their native language. The African-American male was late to class, and initially was assigned to another group (all African-American), but ended up with the Hispanics when he refused to work with a "Girl", as he called an openly gay African-American male. It was fascinating to watch the integrated table. The African-American male absolutely would not look at or speak to the Hispanic male. However, he readily asked questions of the Hispanic female who responded politely, but not at any length. For example, he wanted to know who was answering what questions so he asked the Hispanic female, "What's he doing?" and pointed his elbow at the Hispanic man sitting next to him. She gave him the numbers of the questions the Hispanic male was answering, then went back to work. Throughout the period, the males ignored one another, both acting like the other wasn't there, and all the while the two Hispanic students continued working together. (Comment: intolerance of sexual orientation and race expressed by students and observed by teacher were not mediated.)

Further support of intolerant attitudes held by students were expressed in focus groups. The ninth- and tenth-grade African-American students primarily, did not want Vietnamese in their classes. Most of the Vietnamese students at West Landing High were placed in ninth- and tenth-grade classrooms because they were not fluent in English. The Vietnamese were older than their classmates (often 19 years or older) and did better academically. African-American classmates said that the Vietnamese were "always talking in their Ching Ching", or "talking about me". Furthermore, "teachers pay them attention" and "I get behind" in class.

Therefore, the data suggest that an aspect of the student sphere of influence lay in their choice toward segregation as expressed verbally and through congregation patterns. Student empowerment, lacking in all other aspects of school experiencing, may be gained by denigrating their peers. Yet, the behaviors of the younger students demonstrated in response to forced integration in a cooperative learning situation suggest that if provided the tools to deal with differences, appreciation and tolerance could replace fear and distrust. More influence from teachers, through both modeling and classroom activities, is needed to foster attitudes of tolerance and integration.

Another characteristic of the student sphere of influence includes the echoes of emptiness heard throughout the school year. We interpret the emptiness as stark evidence of the critical level of student discontent. The school felt physically empty and it was --at least half of the students were absent some part of every day (Newbill 1993a, 1993b). Also, the emptiness was reflected in data indicating an historical educational emptiness in opportunity in that a majority of students, especially Hispanic, had a parent, sibling or close friend who had dropped out of high school (Newbill, 1993a, 1993b).

Yet, students spoken with, regardless of ethnicity and grade-level, felt getting an education was important and necessary for success.The Vietnamese students defined success singularly as doing well in school. Most of the other students defined success as graduating from high school, having a family, getting a good job, or going to college. One Hispanic tenth-grade male poignantly expressed the difficultly he had experienced in getting an education. In a focus group, he spoke of his large family and said, "Success is difficult to get. Not everyone can afford college." Yet, in linking success with "going to college", his feelings encapsulized a belief common to most of the students. Therefore, the characteristic of emptiness emerged as a poignant testimony to lack of attendance at school, and the void between the perceptions and opportunities for education for the students.

The dissonance between perception and experience emerged as another characteristic of the student sphere. Student comments during focus groups and responses to autobiographical questions further portray how students' positive feelings of schooling were dimmed by negative experiences. They related in focus groups that teachers and extracurricular activities did not meet their needs. Students identified the characteristics they expected in a "good teacher": "patient", "respect for us as adults", "values us as an individual", "doesn't compare me with other students", and "doesn't have an attitude." Most of their teachers, they felt, did not have these characteristics. One student summed up the general feeling, "They [teachers] want us to act like adults, but they don't treat us like adults."

Considering also the responses to the question, "What is the one thing that is the hardest for you about staying in school?", African-Americans most frequently responded "work required" (22%, or 10 of 45), followed by difficulties surrounding attendance (18%, or 8 of 45), and "nothing" (18%). In contrast, only 1 of 11 (8%) of the Caucasian students complained about the work required. The most frequent response among Caucasians was shared by boredom (27%, or 3 of 11) and attendance (27%), with "nothing" being the second most frequent response (15%, or 2 of 11). These are some of the writings from both ethnic groups:

"Boring classes."
"Going is hard enough."
"The work piles up."
"You have to do so much to make good grades."
"Getting up so early."

That the dissonance between perception and experience seemed to be felt more acutely by the African-American students than the Caucasian students is further exemplified in another question. Seventeen percent (7 of 42) of the African-American but no Caucasian students wrote "none" in response to "Describe a good experience you've had at school." Happily, most of the students were able to describe a good experience at school. Regardless of ethnicity, the experience most frequently involved some type of recognition or receipt of an award.

A final characteristic of the student sphere suggests an apparent developmental change in student perceptions of school. Discussions generated during the focus groups sharply separated the ninth-graders from all the other grades, and placed the

tenth-graders uncertainly and uniquely in-between the upper- and lower- classmen. These developmentally differential perceptions indicated progression from an illuminating hope for success coupled with a resistant attitude toward work for freshmen moving toward a more disillusioning view of school and its experiences as not meeting students' present and future needs.

Ninth-grade students absolutely did not want to be "made" to work. They said they resisted all efforts which "force me to learn." Most classes did not interest them, but they could not offer any suggestions for improvement, except to have more time between classes, more gym classes, and Fridays off. The ninth-graders felt the education they were getting was "good" and "all I'll need" to succeed in life.

In contrast, tenth-graders did not have a clear idea of why they valued school. They said they liked some classes and even found some "interesting," meaning classes that involved them in the learning process and classes whose teachers explained things well. Yet, they were not fully committed to their education nor did they seem concerned about it at this point. They expressed involvement in school primarily through the social events available, but were not convinced of the relevance of classwork. Their responses suggested that school was a place to socialize as well as a place to learn. They "hoped" the education they were getting was providing them the skills the would need to go on to college or get a good job.

The responses given in the autobiographies provide further evidence of the value tenth-grade students placed on schooling. When asked, "My greatest accomplishment is", students most frequently described something positive that happened to them while at school:

"I've never flunked a grade."

"I made it to the 10th grade."

"Making it through school without trouble, yet."

In response to several other questions in the autobiography, the students wrote of the importance and value of schooling: "The most positive message my parents gave me was":

"I am smart and they believe I am going to graduate."

"Stay in school."

"To graduate from high school and try to go to college. "

Further support for the positive value attached to schooling emerged from the student responses to "What is the one thing you'd like to improve about yourself at school?"

"To study more & to get higher grades."

"My grades and quit getting put out of school so much."

"A couple of time[s] when I got an A."

A discussion observed in a senior psychology class underscores the precarious situation of tenth-graders. The teacher, who had taught most of these seniors in tenth-grade history, asked the class to describe their personality at school. One student said he was not a "stable personality", and that he had realized almost too late that school was important; he characterized his back pack as his "bag of knowledge." The teacher agreed that he had made significant changes since tenth-grade, especially in becoming more serious about school. Many students in this psychology class said that

only now were they taking school seriously which corroborated statements made by their peers during the focus group discussions.

Eleventh- and twelfth- graders readily shared their feelings during focus groups. These feelings were predominantly anger, frustration, and fear. They felt unprepared for college, vocational training, or to get a good job, and they strongly believed West Landing High had let them down. They said classes were too easy and not demanding, and that teacher's expectations were low. One student admitted that it was not all the teachers' fault, but that she had not worked as hard as she should have earlier on. Many students, without prompting from anyone, grudgingly agreed. Finally, many of these students spoke of attending Saturday school or planning to attend summer school in order to graduate on time.

In brief, the students at West Landing related experiences in school that made attending difficult and/or unpleasant. Yet, these same students believed school was a place where good things did happen to them primarily thorough peer recognition and a place important to their future success. Barriers to success and positive experiences came from an unexpected source --teachers and administrators.

Teacher and Administrator Sphere

The characteristics of the teacher and administrator sphere of influence emerged through archival data and interviews described fully below. Remarkably, the teachers' perception of school parallel that of students-- a sense of a lack of empowerment, interpersonally with colleagues and professionally with administration and students. The administrator's perceptual field of school is characterized by a sense of threat and being misunderstood.

In interviews, teachers' comments related to their having no input in school decisions and policy-making; unequal allocation of resources and funds; marked disunity among the faculty, with constant bickering between the magnet theme teachers and academic or "core" teachers; and extremely poor relations between the faculty and administrators. Cooperation, collegiality, curriculum coordination, shared decision making, to name a few signatures of a successful school (Ramp & Murphy, 1990), were non-existent. Over three-fourths of the teachers believed that lack of support from other teachers and administrators hindered their classroom practice (Newbill ,1993a, 1993b). These archival data from a perception survey further indicated a striking two-thirds of the teachers did not believe that West Landing High was doing a good job preparing students to compete for post-secondary jobs or to pursue advanced educational opportunities. Significantly, interviews with teachers rarely evoked student-centered comments. When directly queried about students' concerns the teachers commented that, although "these really are good kids", "you can't expect too much from them." Teachers did not want "to over-extend the kids", and would even "repeat a quiz if many do not do well" or would give "participation points" to students just for showing up in class. One teacher said that students "who can do well will do well regardless of all the bad kids in the class." These data locate the source of problems and discontent of teachers' sense of a lack of empowerment in the external world of the students' culture and not in the realm of the internal world of the teacher.

As part of the prior program evaluation data, classroom observations were conducted at all high schools in the district. Comparison among high schools suggests that there were no unusual student problems at West Landing; rather, the problems lay in the way the students were being taught. This interpretation is additionally supported by classroom observations made during this study that certain instructional practices provoked hostile, angry responses in students while other teaching practices were well received by the students. These observations suggest that many teachers taught material rather than students, and, as a consequence, students were not learning. The vignette below, taken from excepts from field notes, characterize the learning environment at West Landing High.

> Upper level class history reviewing for a test tomorrow. The class is very small (three African-American students) sitting in a circle of chairs (three Hispanic students had been called out of class for a Lulac assembly). The teacher (African-American female) is asking the class to define terms, i.e., "What are civil rights?" "What are laws?" At first, the students are making a genuine effort to provide the definitions. They are attentive and seem to want to get it right. As the teacher calls on an individual student, the others encourage him/her to respond. But, they are not able to provide the exact words the teacher wants i.e., "conduct", "justify", "obligation", "duty" - words apparently unfamiliar to these tenth- and eleventh-graders. The teacher in a mocking tone, "I can't believe it! Don't tell me you don't know what civil rights are?" She persistently gives them complex, wordy definitions, but never offers (or searches) for a way to relate the terms to the students' level. The students try for 40 minutes to string together the exact words the teacher wants - but fail. They become increasingly frustrated; a male, who had been the most responsive, pointed out, "That's what I said." Finally, the students' resistance is expressed by cold silence.
>
> An African-American female (who teaches several theme classes) has students in this class whom I've seen in other teacher's classes. They are well-behaved here - out of control in the other classes. Students seem to respond to her because her cultural/maternalistic values are in line with their African-American values. For example, when all the students fail to catch the errors in a sentence, she says it "Hurts my heart." Students kept trying to find the errors; they study the sentence and shout out possibilities. It is fun although frustrating, and she never makes them personally feel like a failure. They find all but one error, and are determined to locate it, too. A young man vainly tries again and again (he wants the answer so bad, he turns to me, grins and whispers, "Where is it?"). "I still love you son, but you're still wrong" was the teachers response.

Considering the faculty relationship with the school administrators, most shared a dislike of the principal. Leadership at West Landing had not been stable during the past six years, and this can, in part, be attributed to a disaffirming faculty. Observation data support a picture of a principal who was rarely seen in the school, who missed appointments, and limited her availability by spending much of her day in her office with the door closed. During interviews, teachers expressed extremely negative comments about her leadership style. Complaints revolved around her “censorship” of

the student newspaper; repression of the multimedia department; replacement of teachers voted-in to key governance positions with one of her "favorites"; control of software used by the business department; channeling of all xeroxing needs through the department secretary because "someone copied more than they were allowed"; and forbidding of parking on the street parallel to the school.

The principal's perception of school speaks to her style of leadership, which she termed "shared governance." Data, including school-based memoranda and observations of staff meetings, could not support her claims. Comments collected during a two hour interview revealed a perceived threat from certain teachers who had physically threatened her as a result of interviews for this study. Indeed, she finally sat down to our interview (after repeated no shows and rescheduling) only after she "received a telephone call last night from a teacher who threatened me" because of our inquiries. We "didn't know the whole story" and she wanted to "cooperate" and "explain my running" of the school. Therefore, a threat from the research was also evident. Her perceptions of West Landing High given during the interview also included her "vision" for the school coupled with frustration in achieving it and her efforts to bring in support for the business community. The school's primary benefactor, who sponsored students staying off drugs and not becoming pregnant through four years of college, was discontinuing support for the program at the end of the year. No other business had stepped in and it did not appear likely that one would, given the reputation of the previous sponsor.

In brief, the sphere of influence of teachers and administrators in the school reveals perceptions of futility and a lack of empowerment for teachers. The interactive nature of the teacher characteristics are the strained relationships among faculty, the distrust between faculty and the principal, and discomfiture with students, and, lastly, a sense of futility in accomplishments of the teachers and the students. Finally, the principal's sense of the culture of school is one in which a feeling of being threatened, being misunderstood, and being isolated is pervasive.

Parental Sphere

The data from parent perception surveys (Newbill, 1993a, 1993b) and prolonged observations at the school reveal minimal parental involvement in the culture of the school. Essentially, the parental sphere is characterized by its sparsity.

Students mentioned family as both provoking and encouraging influences on their school experiences. Teachers, on the other hand, attributed the difficulties in their teaching and relating with students to familial lack of participation and/or negative influences in the realm of education. From surveys, half of all teachers did not believe that communication between themselves and parents was good. Two-thirds of parents admitted that they had not initiated contact with the school. Yet, neither had the school made contact with nearly three-fourths of parents. A parent was never seen inside the building during school hours in the three years of our involvement at the school.

In brief, this sphere is perceived as acutely negative in influence by the teachers/administrator sphere, and highly differentially influential, both positively and negatively, by the student sphere. Therefore, the parental sphere, identified as influential, is interactive with the other two spheres by the very absence of interaction.

Summary of Findings

Several findings suggested from this study of how school culture influences student experiences at an urban high school are as follows:

(1) The cultural context of education is identified by three interactive spheres of influence --the students, teachers and administrators, and parents-- with the students being the orienting sphere of this study. These spheres create a varied, adversarial, and oppressive culture of learning for students in this high school. The extent to which these differing spheres are incompatible is reflected in a lack of student empowerment with the foremost characteristic of powerlessness being discontent and futility.

(2) Student perceptions and experiences at school related to student empowerment define a theory of a facilitative learning environment. Attitudinal preconditions promoting such an environment which emerged from the data are (a) a sense of personal recognition; (b) respect and appreciation; (c) individual acceptance; (d) an influential collaborative voice in school governance including effective progressive and diverse teaching strategies; (e) and increased interactive opportunities with other students.

(3) A major tenet of the grounded theory of a facilitative learning environment was that the more parallel the alignment between students' values about education and teaching and the actual teaching practices of teachers, the more enthusiastically students engage in the process of schooling and the more effective the learning.

Discussion

At West Landing High school, there appeared to be a deep incompatibility between the adult culture, which was collected and organized to reflect the meanings teachers and administrators attach to education, and "kid" culture (Katz, 1993) with needs for empowerment, self-expression, individual recognition, and student-centered, social activities at school. Also, educational expectations and strategies differed among students by grade-level and ethnicity.

Significantly, none of these characteristics are unique to this high school (Ogbu, 1987, 1995b ; Ogbu & Simons, 1994; Patthey-Chavez 1993; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao 1991, 1992; Phelan, Yu, & Davidson 1994; Workman 1986). Our study especially supports some of the findings of Ogbu and co-workers comparative studies of "voluntary" (Asian immigrants in our study) and "involuntary" (African-American and Mexican-American in our study) minorities. For example, our findings show that all students, regardless of ethnic identity, value school and view schooling as an avenue to success. Yet, there was a wider discrepancy between effort (attendance, engagement in class, perceptions of work required) and aspirations for African-American and Hispanic students than the Vietnamese and Caucasian students. As with Ogbu's "voluntary" minorities, the Vietnamese were more conforming to adult expectations and authority by making good grades, following school rules, and respecting teachers without question. However, we did not find a complete distrust among African-Americans of the education being given as did Ogbu (1987). Rather, the African-American students felt they were receiving a good education (under-

classmen) or attributed part of the difficulties they were experiencing to their work strategies (upper-classmen).

A decade ago, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explained African-American student failure using a "cultural-ecological" model characterized by inferior schooling, limited opportunities, perception of and responses to school in which success is vilified as "acting white." Following upon the earlier work, Ogbu (1993, 1995a) postulated a theory of a "cultural frame of reference" as an explanation of how school success is affected by cultural identity. Both of these theory-building efforts are limited to interpretations of how within-group differences influence student schooling experiences (black to black in Fordham and Ogbu and voluntary and involuntary minorities in subsequent work by Ogbu). Our study expands upon this understanding of student school success to encompass school culture and how it influences student perceptions of and experiences in school.

The findings of this study and previous studies (see Introduction and above) suggest a direction toward the adoption and application of an educational theory of a facilitative learning environment. This theory emerged from our data as a lack of student empowerment and the absence of preconditions which facilitate learning: recognition, respect, acceptance, voice, and social opportunity in the student culture of West Landing High. This theory adds to an exhaustive base of research indicating their resounding effectiveness in student learning.

Note

1. The structured autobiography developed for this study is available upon request from the authors.

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